Caring for the Poor is Government's Biblical Role
By Jim Wallis

There is hardly a more controversial political battle in America today than that around the role of government. The ideological sides have lined up, and the arguments rage about the size of government: how big, how small should it be? Some famously have said government should be shrunk so small that
it "could be drowned in a bathtub."
But I want to suggest that what size the government should be is the wrong question. A more useful discussion would be about the purposes of government and whether ours is fulfilling them. So let's look at what the Bible says.
The words of Paul in the 13th chapter of Romans are perhaps the most extensive teaching in the New Testament about the role and purposes of government. Paul says those purposes are twofold: to restrain evil by punishing evildoers and to serve peace and orderly conduct by rewarding good behavior. Civil authority is designed to be "God's servant for your good" (13:4). Today we might say "the common good" is to be the focus and goal of government.
So the purpose of government, according to Paul, is to protect and promote: protect from the evil and promote the good. We are even instructed to pay taxes for those purposes. So to disparage government per se — to see government as the central problem in society — is simply not a biblical position.
First, government is supposed to protect its people. That certainly means protecting its citizens' safety and security. Crime and violence will always be real in this world, and that's why we have the police, who are meant to keep our streets, neighborhoods, and homes safe.
Governments also need to protect their people judicially, and make sure our legal and court systems are procedurally just and fair. The biblical prophets regularly rail against corrupt court decisions and systems, in which the wealthy and powerful manipulate the legal processes for their own benefit and put the poor into greater debt or distress. The prophet Amos speaks directly to the courts (and government) when he says, "Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts" (Amos 5:15).
But along with protecting, what should governments promote? The prophets hold kings, rulers, judges, and even employers accountable to the demands of justice and fairness, therefore promoting those values.
And the Scriptures say that governmental authority is to protect the poor in particular. The biblical prophets are consistent and adamant in their condemnation of injustice to the poor, and frequently follow their statements by requiring the king (the government) to act justly. That prophetic expectation did not apply only to the kings of Israel but was also extended to the kings of neighboring lands and peoples.
Jeremiah, speaking of King Josiah, said, "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well."
Psalm 72 begins with a prayer for kings or political leaders: "Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor."
There is a powerful vision here for promoting the common good — a vision of "righteous" prosperity for all the people, with special attention to the poor and to "deliverance" for the most vulnerable and needy, and even a concern for the land.
Evangelical theologian Ron Sider says:
The biblical understanding of justice clearly includes both procedural and distributive aspects. That the procedures must be fair is clear in the several texts that demand unbiased courts (Exodus 23:2-8; Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 1:17; 10:17-19). That distributive justice (i.e., fair outcomes) is also a central part of justice is evident not just from the hundreds of texts about God's concern for the poor ... but also in the meaning of the key Hebrew words for justice (mishpat and tsedaqah).
Time and again the prophets use mishpat and tsedaqah to refer to fair economic outcomes. Immediately after denouncing Israel and Judah for the absence of justice, the prophet Isaiah condemns the way rich and powerful landowners have acquired all the land by pushing out small farmers (Isaiah 5:7-9). It is important to note that even though in this text the prophet does not say the powerful acted illegally, he nevertheless denounces the unfair outcome.
Notice that Sider says "fair outcomes" and not "equal outcomes." The political right's continuing
accusation against all who would hold governments accountable for justice is that we are really aiming for equal outcomes from public policy. But that simply is not true.

Indeed, the historical attempts by many Marxist governments to create equal outcomes have dramatically shown the great dangers of how the concentration of power in a few government hands has led to totalitarian results. The theological reason for that is the presence and power of sin, and the inability of such fallible human creatures to create social utopias on earth.

Yet the biblical prophets do hold their rulers, courts, and judges, and landowners and employers accountable to the values of fairness, justice, and even mercy. The theological reasons for that are, in fact, the same: the reality of evil and sin in the concentration of power — both political and economic — and the need to hold that power accountable to justice, especially in the protection of the poor. So fair outcomes, and not equal ones, are the goal of governments.

Governments should provide a check on powerful people, institutions, and interests in the society that, if left unchecked, might run over their fellow citizens, the economy, and certainly the poor. If government is rendered unable to "punish the evil" and "reward the good" when it comes to the behavior of huge corporations and banks, for example, exactly who else is going to do that? And coming to a better moral balance in achieving fiscal responsibility, while protecting the poor, should be a bipartisan effort.

The radically anti-government ideology of the current right wing Tea Party ideology is simply contrary to a more biblical view of government, the need for checks and balances, the sinfulness of too much concentrated power in either the government or the market, the responsibilities we have for our neighbor and the God-ordained purposes of government — in addition to the churches — to serve the common good and, in particular, to protect the poor.


**Alan Grayson, “11 Years Ago Today”**
Reader Supported News, June 8, 2012
Grayson writes: "In the past 11 years, the number of Americans living in poverty has increased from 33 million to 44 million. The number of Americans receiving food stamps has risen from 18 million to 46 million. 'Trickle-down' has not even been a trickle."

**Danny Schechter, “Can the 1% Help Fight Poverty?”**
Reader Supported News, June 8, 2012
Danny Schechter writes: "Synergos, a Rockefeller family NGO, seeks common ground with anti-poverty activists around the world. But do reformist groups funded by the rich help solve problems or perpetuate them."

**books.google.com** - This collection gathers ninety-one essays written by Mike Sharpe that appeared in *Challenge: The Magazine of Economic Affairs* from 1973 through 2011. They deal with virtually every aspect of the U.S. and international economies. The title reflects the fact that income and wealth inequalities in the U.S....  [http://books.google.com/books/about/America_In_Decline.html?id=vTd-](http://books.google.com/books/about/America_In_Decline.html?id=vTd-)

This collection gathers ninety-one essays written by Mike Sharpe that appeared in Challenge: The Magazine of Economic Affairs from 1973 through 2011. They deal with virtually every aspect of the U.S. and international economies. The title reflects the fact that income and wealth inequalities in the U.S. have increased to disastrous levels not seen since the 1920s. The wealthy have recaptured the power to make the rules almost unilaterally. The author also examines the decline of Europe.
and Russia, the problematic rise of China, and the enigmatic portent of the Arab Spring. The book begins with the stagflation of the 1970s and ends with the bust of the 2000s, clinching the case, in the author’s opinion, that America has been in decline for more than three decades. The tide can be reversed if and when we are ready to use fact-based economic policies.

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The Other America, 2012: Confronting the Poverty Epidemic

Sasha Abramsky
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Clarksdale, Mississippi, might seem an unlikely starting point for a meditation on twenty-first-century American inequality. After all, the music the town’s fame rests on is born of the sorrow and racial exploitations of another century. Clarksdale proudly markets itself as the home of the blues: the world’s best blues musicians still come to jam in the little Delta town where W.C. Handy once lived, where Bessie Smith died and where Robert Johnson supposedly made his infamous pact with the devil at a crossroads on the edge of town.

But Clarksdale is also the site of a very different crossroads, one in many ways emblematic of what America is becoming: a place of stunning divides and dramatically disparate life expectations between rich and poor. The side streets of central Clarksdale are lined with tiny,
dilapidated wooden homes. Most residents here make do without basic services and
amenities, including anything beyond a bare-bones education, and many lack access to the
broader cash economy. In contrast, the stately old townhouses in the historic district—places
where several Mississippi governors grew up, where the young Tennessee Williams ran
around while staying with his grandparents—look like the scenic backdrop to a romantic film
set in the antebellum South. And the newer, more palatial mansions in the suburbs ringing the
town could serve as staging grounds for a reality TV show on the nouveau riche.

In the poorer section of Clarksdale, in a subsidized housing unit about the size of a small
boat’s cabin, lives 88-year-old Amos Harper, a jack-of-all-trades who grew up in a
sharecropping family. Harper spent decades doing everything from farmwork to interstate
tractor-trailer transport. These days, he gets up early to supplement his $765 monthly Social
Security check, collecting cans from the gutters and trading them in for 49 cents per pound.
When he isn’t doing that, he’s mowing lawns and running errands for several of the town’s
richer residents, including Bill Luckett.

Luckett and his wife live in a huge house designed by architect E. Fay Jones, a Frank Lloyd
Wright mentee. Every detail, from the high ceilings to the sunken rooms, has been carefully
planned. The larger-than-life home complements the larger-than-life persona of Luckett, a
burly 64-year-old attorney and real estate developer with a shock of gray hair who is
“president of everything from a country club to a hunting club,” as he puts it. Luckett serves on
a state legal aid board and various educational advisory boards, and he counts among his
acquaintances some of the country’s top politicians and entertainers.

He also considers Harper a friend, although, as Luckett would be the first to acknowledge, the
friendship is deeply unequal. Until age slowed him down, Harper would routinely show up at
the Ground Zero blues club, a raucous place Luckett owns with actor Morgan Freeman, showing off dance moves that Luckett says are some of the best in town.

For Luckett, Clarksdale's imbalances are indicative of broader fissures and inequities in Mississippi—and, he believes, across America. Angry at the way the political system is ignoring poverty, Luckett ran for governor last year on an anti-poverty and invest-in-education platform. He came in a strong second in the Democratic primary, though in a state as heavily Republican as Mississippi, that didn’t necessarily count for much. “I’d never intended to get into politics,” he explains over a glass of red wine in one of his living rooms. But, he says, lack of investment in public education, an increasingly regressive tax system and other challenges pushed him into the fray. “America has never had as greedy a top 1 percent as we have now. The inequality has reached dangerous proportions.”

Unfortunately, Luckett is a rare exception in Mississippi politics. The state's leadership is exemplified by ex-governor Haley Barbour and current governor Phil Bryant, who both won election by forging alliances between country club denizens and the culturally conservative white working class, which both preach the virtues of shrinking government, rolling back regulations and cutting social services. “When you get a white guy walking out of his rusty trailer into his pickup truck and he’s got a Vote Republican placard in his yard, then you’ve reached the height of stupidity,” Luckett says.

Sadly, this too is reflective of the nation. At a moment when the wealthy flourish atop a sea of state subsidies (with the tacit compliance of many of the working poor), while the poor are barely protected by a frayed social safety net and often disengaged from the decision-making processes that structure their lives, confronting the root causes of poverty is particularly daunting and increasingly urgent.
For years, the story of poverty in America has been swept into the nether regions of our collective consciousness. Now, however, a new opportunity has opened up to place poverty and inequality center-stage again. Fifty years after Michael Harrington brought the “invisible poor” out of the shadows in his classic exposé *The Other America*, another generation is discovering that many parts of the country, and many demographic groups, are impoverished. And the issue is, thankfully, being reinjected into the national conversation. With the high visibility and popular support of the Occupy movement—and with the presidential campaign shaping up as a contest pitting the interests of the 99 percent against those of the wealthiest 1 percent—the poor stand at least some chance of having their issues aired once more.

Over the past year, I have interviewed hundreds of impoverished Americans about their experiences. Many of them I met on a 3,000-mile drive in December through the Southwest and South. Their voices are powerful, as are the statistics that tell the collective story of economic hardship in the United States. For although the economy has sputtered back to life in recent months, 8.3 percent of the workforce remains unemployed, and millions more have opted out of the job market altogether over the past few years. Perhaps an even starker measure of America’s poverty problem can be found in “food insecurity” data: after decades of success fighting hunger, the country is sliding back; ever more families cannot feed themselves. Forty-six million Americans subsist on food stamps, an increase of more than 14 million over the past four years, at an annual cost to the government of about $65 billion. The Food Research and Action Center estimates that another several million are eligible, making do without government assistance. FRAC found that only 40 percent of food stamp–eligible residents of San Diego are using the program. In Denver the figure is 46 percent; in Los...
As poverty spreads, it is carving broader arcs of desperation throughout the country. In the wake of the housing crisis and the lengthy recession, with its jobless aftermath—along with the drawn-out collapse of many employment sectors and the decline in purchasing power of wages in many other sectors—a rising number of Americans are struggling to make it from one paycheck, or unemployment check, to the next. People who used to have modest degrees of security in regions traditionally more affluent than the Delta are seeing that security erode. Below them, people who had long had minimal levels of security are seeing their most basic needs going unmet as they fall through gaping holes in a shredded safety net. Relative hardship and absolute destitution are, in other words, on the march.

Once-booming economies like Nevada’s have shrunk to levels of unemployment and homelessness not seen since the height of the Great Depression. Once-proud industries have been brought low. Once-booming real estate ventures—in Florida, Arizona, Nevada, California—are ghost towns. “Poverty is creeping into the diminishing middle class,” notes Iray Nabatoff, a beret-wearing community advocate who runs a social services organization in the town of Arabi, in Louisiana’s St. Bernard Parish, and who is vice-chairman of a group called Unified Non-Profits of Greater New Orleans. “It’s everywhere. I don’t think we’ve ever seen poverty to the level we’re now seeing.”

As in Harrington’s day, a disproportionate share of the nation’s poor are African-American and Latino. More than a quarter of blacks and Latinos live below the government-defined poverty line (about $11,000 per year for an individual, $23,000 for a family of four), compared with 12 percent of Asian-Americans and slightly less than 10 percent of whites. Among African-Americans and Latinos, the slide into poverty has been marked by a concomitant collapse in Angeles, 56 percent.
assets. This past July the Pew Research Center released an analysis of government data that concluded that the median wealth of white households was a staggering eighteen times that of Hispanic households and twenty times that of African-Americans. Fueled by disproportionate home foreclosures and underwater mortgages among these minorities, this trend indicates a reversal of decades of progress toward reducing such inequalities. “From 2005 to 2009, inflation-adjusted median wealth fell by 66% among Hispanic households and 53% among black households,” says the report, “compared with just 16% among white households.”

Although poverty is borne more heavily by minorities, that doesn’t mean that it is only, or even mainly, a “minority problem.” In fact, about 47 million Americans—of all colors, ethnicities and backgrounds—are living at or below the poverty line. (That figure is up from 37 million before the recent housing crisis.) Of these, more than 20 million are living in what’s called “deep poverty,” with incomes that put them and their families at below 50 percent of the poverty line. More than 16 million children in the United States, 22 percent of the country’s kids, live in poverty, the highest total since 1962 and the highest percentage since Bill Clinton took office in 1993.

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Even these sorry numbers, however, don’t tell the full story. Additional millions of men, women and children in America are living below what economists like Dean Baker, co-director of the Washington-based Center for Economic and Policy Research, term a “living wage” threshold. Too affluent to qualify for most government assistance programs but too poor to make ends meet, they are working at jobs that provide few or no benefits and are thus perpetually at risk of falling into devastating debt.
Take, for example, Albuquerque resident Megan Roberts, a young mother whose husband worked as a diesel mechanic for a trucking company, and whose family was kicked off Medicaid when he received a small hourly raise. Megan's appendix ruptured while she and her family were temporarily living in California's Central Valley, and they were bankrupted by close to $100,000 in medical bills. When she later developed cancer, they faced an additional $186,000 in unpayable debt.

Millions of workers and their families are similarly vulnerable to such mundane changes as a slight decline in the number of hours per workweek or an extra few cents per gallon in the cost of gasoline. Many are elderly, forced back to bottom-of-the-economy jobs because of the low dollar amount of their Social Security checks and/or the collapse in value of their investments following the events of 2008.

One such person is 67-year-old Mary Vasquez, whose Social Security check is $600 and whose rent is $500. A tiny woman, her health broken by cancer, heart attacks, diabetes, high blood pressure and a multitude of other ailments, Vasquez works as a phone operator at a Walmart on the outskirts of Dallas. In the first eleven months of 2011, she earned slightly under $23,800. After taxes, exorbitant health insurance premiums and automatic deductions to buy Walmart stock—a faux-savings option that the mega-company strongly encourages its employees to take, although most of them are too poor to retire on these savings—she netted $15,887. A large part of her salary went for medical expenses not covered by Medicare or her Walmart healthcare plan; much of the rest went to pay down usurious payday loans she’d accumulated in recent years as her health declined.

Sitting in a union hall in the suburb of Grapevine, Vasquez (one of a handful of employees working to unionize her workplace) explains that she skips “mostly breakfast and sometimes
lunch." As a diabetic, she is supposed to eat fresh produce. Instead, she says, “a lot of times I buy a TV dinner; we have them on sale for 88 cents. A lot of times, food, I can’t pay for.”

Another American who struggles to put food on the table is Jorge, a 57-year-old who migrated to the United States from Mexico in 1982. Jorge (who doesn’t want his last name used) lives with his wife in the large Chaparral colonia, an informal settlement of trailers, small houses and shanties near Las Cruces, New Mexico. Many of the roads are unpaved; many homes are not on the sewage or natural gas systems. There is a jarring contrast here between the ugliness of the settlement and the beauty of the desert landscape.

“There’s a lot of deterioration of the trailers,” Jorge says in Spanish. “In winter, pipes explode because of the freeze. I don’t have water right now. Heating is so expensive, with propane gas. Those who have little children, they have to use it, but it’s so expensive.” A volunteer firefighter, he adds, “We see a lot of accidents with water heaters and explosions with the propane tanks.”

Jorge recently had to give up his construction job because of worsening diabetes. These days he lives on $592 a month in disability payments, as well as his wife’s income from a part-time job. With no access to credit, the couple have been forced to borrow from payday loan companies, routinely paying $600 back on a $200 loan to pay their bills. The hole gets deeper with each new loan. They had to cede their car titles to the loan companies to guarantee their debts. This sort of situation is ubiquitous in the colonia. In fact, payday loans were one of the nation’s few growth industries during the recession.

Jorge and his wife volunteer at the Chaparral food pantry. Sometimes, he admits, they are forced to use its services themselves. “We go monthly. We get cans, bread, meat, fruit
sometimes. Sometimes we don't eat, or limit our food. Sometimes we just have two meals.
One meal. The illness, diabetes, I need three meals. Sometimes I can't complete the
nutritional requirements. That's just how it is."

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In New Mexico, which registers second worst in the country in poverty and sixth worst on
inequality indicators, economic hardship is so widespread that the crisis is becoming
increasingly unavoidable in political discussions. “On a day-to-day basis,” says Kim Posich,
executive director of the New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, “people are doing without—
doing with less access to healthcare, less access to food and nutrition. These are things that
affect you in profound ways. There are communities in New Mexico that the school buses
won’t go into—you can’t get emergency vehicles into—because the roads are in such terrible
shape. They have to borrow a truck to go out to a source of water, and pay to stick
somebody’s hose into a tank on the back of their truck—just to have water to bathe and to
drink. We’re talking very basic amenities. We’re talking about a level of poverty, in the
colonias, that we often see in third world nations. In New Mexico, 130,000 people live in
colonias.”

To counter poverty and its causes, Posich’s organization is pushing to protect the state’s
Medicaid program from proposed cuts (lack of affordable healthcare is one of the primary
reasons people slide into destitution). The center is also working to shore up food-assistance
programs and to ensure that the Affordable Care Act is implemented in the state. Longer term,
Posich and his colleagues are pursuing a living-wage campaign and aiming to shift the debate
on taxes to reflect principles of fairness and equity for people at the bottom of the economy.
“Certainly we want people to be able to earn an income in New Mexico that will have them be
financially stable,” Posich says. “You can't live in New Mexico and be earning less than $36,000 a year if you've got a couple kids, and be able to survive your car breaking down or being out of work for a couple weeks because you have the flu.”

There are myriad signs that poverty and equity are starting to figure more prominently in national politics, too. In recent years, legislators’ willingness to confront the crisis and craft innovative solutions to it was hampered by venomous anti-tax, anti-government rhetoric from the right, and by conservative oratory that blames the poor, often in barely camouflaged racial terms, for their misery. Even as national unemployment and poverty figures reached alarming highs during the recession, Democrats shied away from tackling the issue. President Obama repeatedly emphasized his commitment to protecting the struggling middle class, but he never pushed Congress to come up with a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy.

The Progressive Caucus attempted to buck this trend last year when it introduced a People's Budget, which emphasized infrastructure investments over tax cuts for the wealthy. And when the Occupy movement descended on Wall Street in the fall, the terms of the debate shifted radically. Suddenly Democrats were keen to jump on the bandwagon. In fact, President Obama launched his re-election campaign with a series of speeches decrying the country’s growing inequalities and increasingly regressive tax codes. In Osawatomie, Kansas, the president declared that the growing chasm between rich and poor was “the defining issue of our time. This is a make-or-break moment for the middle class,” he said, “and for all those who are fighting to get into the middle class. Because what’s at stake is whether this will be a country where working people can earn enough to raise a family, build a modest savings, own a home, secure their retirement.” Since that speech, Obama has repeatedly struck a more radical economic note than he did in the first three years of his presidency.
Some Republicans, sensing that their constituents have drawn connections between their financial struggles and an economy apparently rigged to favor the wealthy, have striven to show their concern about America’s growing income divisions. It goes without saying that they have failed miserably. Witness the symbolic GOP bill in Congress to ban millionaires from getting food stamps—a ham-handed attempt to shift attention away from the causes and conditions of poverty and toward frauds supposedly bilking the government and the taxpayer. It was a stunt, and a stupid one, since access to food stamps is restricted to those at or below 130 percent of the poverty line. But it did show that the GOP is feeling the heat, finally realizing that being defined as the party of multimillionaires is a liability.

It was in this context that Mitt Romney’s presidential primary opponents attacked him for his role in taking over underperforming companies and throwing workers out of their jobs. The spectacle of Republicans ganging up on Romney for being a “vulture capitalist” was surreal; those same politicians spent much of the primary season in a competition for least compassionate conservative. Early on, Romney—who has repeatedly touted his extraordinary wealth as testimony to his dynamic personality—stumbled into an admission that he’s “not concerned about the very poor” and then offered an equally out-of-touch clarification that he really meant that poor Americans have a strong safety net to fall back on. Newt Gingrich decried a culture that gives people food stamps instead of enforcing a “work ethic,” and lowered the racebaiting bar by labeling Obama the “food stamp president”—code that Gingrich’s overwhelmingly white Southern supporters understood all too well. His equally unempathic rival Rick Santorum notoriously promised a crowd in Iowa that under his presidency hard-working (presumably white) taxpayers wouldn’t have to pay for nutritional assistance for do-nothing blacks. Come the general election, the GOP’s inability to understand the struggles of millions of ordinary Americans could well come back to haunt the
The Occupy movement has been far more effective than Washington at highlighting the extent of poverty and plutocracy in America. But Occupy, too, has struggled to connect with the people it claims to speak for. As I traveled the country interviewing people living in poverty, I was struck by how few were involved in the movement. Many had little or no awareness of it. Others had heard of it and generally supported its aims—but many seemed alienated by its imagery. "I am scared that all of it is for naught at this point," explained Lauren Kostelnick, a New Mexico massage therapist and food co-op worker who earned about $13,000 in 2011.

“They’re really not aware of what’s going on in the country right now, in terms of the politics around food stamps, the Pell grant, things like that—things that will really influence their lives,” says Gloria Dickerson, a middle-aged businesswoman who has returned to her childhood home, the depressed Mississippi Delta town of Drew, to work with the underprivileged. “They’re trying to survive day to day, to put food on the table.”

The disenfranchisement and pervasive sense of loneliness among the poor is, of course, well-known. Fifty years ago, Harrington wrote eloquently about the extreme isolation of America’s “invisible land”; and nearly forty years before that, Bessie Smith famously sang, “Nobody knows you when you’re down and out.” Today, whether the poverty is total or relative, whether it is in a desperate inner city or a depressed suburb, many of the psychological costs are the same. A poor person in America is deeply, profoundly alone.

One sees this loneliness in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans—a world of people abandoned by the body politic in the wake of natural disaster, left to fend for themselves.
There, just three miles from the thriving tourist hub of the French Quarter, lie street after street of destroyed, gutted houses and acres of overgrown lots where there once stood stores and homes, churches and schools. It is an apocalyptic landscape, yet it is also strangely invisible—off the beaten path, hidden from the decadent, jazzy splendors of Bourbon Street, a place of national shame all too easy to forget.

In pre-Katrina New Orleans, Census Bureau data showed that 50 percent of African-American children under the age of 5 were living below the poverty line. That figure was terrifyingly high—but not as high as the current estimates. Post-Katrina, the Census Bureau found that the figure had spiked to more than 65 percent.

Darren McKinney, a middle-aged man on disability and food stamps who has spent the past six years working to salvage some of the Ninth Ward’s wooden homes, calls it “a ghost town at nighttime.” When we met, he was sitting on a concrete slab that used to be the base of a house on Caffin Avenue, taking a break from working on a graffiti-covered hull. “I feel depressed,” he said. “But I try to keep positive to get through the rest of the day.”

And one also sees this loneliness a thousand miles west of the Big Easy, in the southwestern corner of Texas. Every day, thousands of visitors, migrant workers and would-be immigrants cross the Rio Grande on two of the international bridges that connect Juarez, Mexico, to El Paso, disgorging near Ninth Avenue, a long, seedy-looking thoroughfare that runs parallel to the international border. All along that street, in plain view of the barbed wire—surrounded Department of Homeland Security compound, migrants sleep. Come midnight, they wake up to seek out the street’s omnipresent labor contractors. If they’re lucky, the migrants get put onto trucks at 3 am and driven to work in fields throughout southern Texas and New Mexico.
And so it makes sense that Ninth Avenue is where Carlos Marentes, a onetime political cartoonist who migrated to the United States in the early 1970s, runs a community center for impoverished farm laborers. There, they can get a free meal, a place to sleep, some hand-me-down clothes and a bathroom. Evenings, before the midnight stampede, dozens of men, women and children doze back to back in its halls and offices. Some of the migrants have lived at the center for years.

For Marentes, the border wars and the immigration debate are largely missing the point: his clients are doing work that others don’t want to do, for wages others wouldn’t accept. Not only do they face persistent hostility simply for being in the country; they also find their wages increasingly bid down because so many agricultural jobs are being done by machines. “You have an oversupply of labor,” he explains. “That is a condition the employers take advantage of. The result is, the farmworkers are the poorest of all the workers.”

Fidencio Fabela, who lived at the community center for years before moving into a small apartment, and who still gets up in the middle of the night to hire himself out to contractors, says, “I work in anything from the chili harvest to preparing the lettuce harvest, and in the cotton fields cleaning the rows of leaves.” A short, wizened, toothless septuagenarian with the wrinkled face of someone who has spent decades working under the hot sun, Fabela notes that “at this age, I don’t have steady work. I just get temporary jobs. I get $8 per hour. The work starts around 6 and goes to 2 or 3 in the afternoon.” Onion harvests, he declares, are the hardest. “You’re bent over. People in that harvest don’t last. It gets so bad that after a little while you can’t sit down.”

When Occupy El Paso asked Marentes to come speak to them, he leapt at the chance. “I told them,” he recalls, “that the 99 percent did not include farmworkers. No matter how hard they
work, they cannot enter the 99 percent. They are at the margins.” The average income of a seasonal farmworker in the El Paso area, he noted, was about $6,000 per year, “not even close to the so-called federal poverty income guidelines. As hard as they work, attempt to do something, they cannot even come close to the poverty line.”

In recent years, says Marentes, too many politicians have acted “as the foremen of the rich.” Now, with more people regarding poverty as a moral cancer, a growing chorus of voices is urging the political classes to get serious about tackling the country’s profound levels of inequality.

“We think that one of the basic problems, or manifestations of one of the basic problems, is this growing divide between the wealthiest and the poorest in our country,” avers Kim Posich. “That’s the biggest challenge, as I see it. How do we provide opportunity for the poorest of our population to be able to establish a stable livelihood? How do we develop assets? Decent wages?”

As Jessica Bartholow of the Los Angeles–based Western Center on Law and Poverty puts it, surely the wealthiest nation on earth can make some bare minimum guarantees to our population: not that everyone will end up affluent or even comfortable, but that no one should have to live on income that is less than half the federally defined poverty level. Ensuring a basic level of assistance above 50 percent of the poverty line, she argues, should be a national entitlement. If we allow the number to drop below that, she explains, “we’re putting kids in extreme danger—they’re going to the hospital more often, missing school, missing opportunity at a great rate.”

For years such aspirations, modest as they are, have been seen as politically improvident.
The result has been a growth in inequality not experienced in this country since the 1920s. Now, however, significant movements are growing up to highlight these problems and to challenge the notion that such divisions are somehow an inevitable byproduct of modernity. The movements are young and somewhat inchoate; they are, however, vital. America’s democratic culture cannot be restored to health unless we acknowledge the scale of poverty and start developing big-picture strategies to tackle the epidemic.

Sasha Abramsky
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Ignoring Poverty in the U.S.
The Corporate Takeover of Public Education
By: P. L. Thomas, Furman University.


Ignoring Poverty in the U.S.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Education examines the divide between a commitment to public education and our cultural myths and more powerful commitment to consumerism and corporate America. The book addresses poverty in the context of the following: the historical and conflicting purposes in public education—how schools became positivistic/behavioral in our quest to produce workers for industry; the accountability era—how A Nation at Risk through NCLB have served corporate interest in dismantling public education and dissolving teachers unions; the media and misinformation about education; charter schools as political/corporate compromise masking poverty; demonizing schools and scapegoating teachers—from misusing the SAT to VAM evaluations of teachers; rethinking the purpose of schools—shifting from schools as social saviors to addressing poverty so that public education can fulfill its purpose of empowering everyone in a democracy; and reframing how we view people living in poverty—rejecting deficit views of people living in poverty and students struggling in school under the weight of lives in poverty.

This work is intended to confront the growing misinformation about the interplay among poverty, public schools, and what schools can accomplish while political and corporate leadership push agendas aimed at replacing public education with alternatives such as charter schools. The audience for the publication includes educators, educational reformers, politicians, and any member of the wider public interested in public education.

The Democratic Party Sleeps on FDR’s Legacy
By Ralph Nader, Reader Supported News  12 August 12

alling Obama, Pelosi, Reid and the rest of the Democratic Party, elected officials, political operatives and labor's leader Richard Trumka. Thirty million American workers want and need a federal minimum wage of $10 per hour which is slightly less than their predecessors got in 1968 - yes 1968 - adjusted for inflation. What will it take for you to make this a priority?

Of course you all would like to see these desperate workers get an additional $2,000 - $4,500 a year for the barest necessities of life for themselves and their children. Sure, it is easy to be on the record and not on the ramparts for a higher minimum wage. What about the trust that your voters and your rank and file invested in you?

Imagine mobilizing Congress to have workers catch up with 1968 when worker productivity was about half of what it is today.

What would President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who signed the first minimum wage law in 1938, say about today's pathetic Democrats (with few exceptions like the more than twenty Representatives who signed on to Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr.'s H.R. 5901 bill to raise the minimum wage to $10 per hour)? Remember how FDR pushed his Democrats in the 1930s? He would not have tolerated today's Democratic Party of caution, cash and cowardliness.

Were the Democrats from the White House, to Congress, to Richard Trumka and the major labor unions to immediately make the $10 minimum wage a national, frontline issue, which they certainly could if they want, here are the arguments they can make:

1. Such an overdue raise is an economically and morally necessary initiative. The U.S. has the lowest national minimum wage of $7.25 per hour among major western nations, by a lot. France is over $11 and in Canada, the minimum wage ranges from $9.40 - $11, plus Canadians have a superior social safety net. Meanwhile, the U.S. has the highest paid CEOs, by far, in the world.

2. Over the years, poll after poll shows that 70 percent of the people support having the minimum wage keep up with inflation. That number includes many conservatives and Republicans. Even Rick Santorum and Mitt Romney, over the years, stood for this principle, even though Romney has hemmed and hawed in recent months.

3. Are there any economists saying that our shaky economy does not need more consumer demand? A $10 minimum wage quickly releases billions of dollars in new spending by the poor. Poor! The single word the cowering Democrats, including presidential candidates, have refused to use since Jimmy Carter. NPR's Tavis Smiley on his poverty tour challenges Barack Obama: "Poor. Say it, Mr. President, say it. Poor!"

4. More income for the poor means less child and family poverty which means less reliance on federal outlays for the poor to survive. The big companies, for example, take advantage of this by steering some of their employees to programs such as Medicaid. As Terrance Heath recently noted in an op-ed in the Nation of Change: "So all of us are subsidizing the wealthy owners and executives of Walmart, McDonald's, and Target."
5. A new report by the respected National Employment Law Project titled "The Big Business, Corporate Profits, and the Minimum Wage," said that "the majority (66 percent) of low-wage workers are not employed by small businesses but by large corporations." The 50 largest of their employers are mostly "in strong financial positions." And note this finding by NELP: "The top executive compensation averaged $9.4 million last year at these firms." This means that the bosses, before taking a lunch on January 2, made more money than a minimum wage worker makes in a year. Talk about the corrosive effects of inequality which have been fed by the top one percent taking 93 percent of the income growth in 2010, according to Holly Sklar of Business for a Fair Minimum Wage.

6. Enlightened business leaders are ready to support the Democrats on this $10 minimum wage initiative. Jeff Long, vice president of Costco, gives the obvious reasons that the retrograde corporatists ignore: "At Costco, we know good wages are good business. We keep our overhead low while still paying a starting wage of $11 an hour. Our employees are a big reason why our sales per square foot is almost double that of our nearest competitor. Instead of minimizing wages, we know it's a lot more profitable for the long-term to minimize employee turnover and maximize employee productivity and commitment, product value, customer service and company reputation."

7. A $10 minimum wage will create jobs because sales will increase. Businesses, having lunched off the windfall of a falling real minimum wage since 1968, should be willing to recognize this greater good. The leading scholar refuting the net job loss propaganda is Alan Krueger who now is head of Obama's Council of Economic Advisers. Certainly the people of Santa Fe, New Mexico are not seeing job losses there where the city minimum wage has been $9.50 per hour.

8. The corporate oligarchy has no moral standing whatsoever. Many of the nations' corporate giants pay no income tax or very little, far less than a cab driver. Last month, Ford Motor Co. paid no federal or state income taxes despite registering nearly $9 billion in profits. It is hard for companies making record profits and paying executives record pay to have much credibility on this subject. Further, small business has received 17 small business tax breaks under Obama.

August is the congressional recess month. Members of Congress are back home campaigning. Go to their public meetings and ask them directly whether they will vote for a $10 minimum wage when they return to Washington, D.C. after Labor Day, or call their office. One worker went up and asked this question of his representative, Cong. Bill Young (R-Fla.), who gave him the curled lip - "Why do you want that benefit? Get a job." This snarl made news all over the country.

Ask "the question" Americans, again and again until Labor Day. By then, maybe Mr. Trumka and the AFL-CIO will bestir their political muscles and march with the low-wage workers and recognize what they do for all of us.

Ralph Nader is a consumer advocate, lawyer and author. His most recent book - and first novel - is Only the Super-Rich Can Save Us. His most recent work of non-fiction is The Seventeen Traditions.
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